

Marine vehicles disembarking on Tunisian beach, Atlas Hinge.



U.S. Navy (Richard Thomas O'Connor)

# Grading Theater Engagement Planning

By BARRY M. BLECHMAN, KEVIN P. O'PREY, and RENEE LAJOIE

**T**he Pentagon institutionalized planning for shaping forces and other assets for peacetime engagement in 1997. It organizes such efforts through theater engagement plans. First, the Office of the Secretary of Defense prioritizes its regional objectives in Contingency Planning Guidance. In turn, the Chairman develops a Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan and then formally tasks CINCs and executive agents to produce their respective plans.

Overall the results of shaping have been positive. The fact that the noncombat use of forces is systematically evaluated bodes well. Militaries have always had political and policy applications. Shaping merely recognizes that reality and seeks to exploit it. That said, a number of issues have been raised as part of the more systematic use of shaping by DOD, and the current system could do with some revision.

## Regional Focus

An analysis of global shaping activities reveals that regional differentiation is fundamental. Regions, even countries, require unique shaping strategies and programs. However, it seems that the planning process for theater engagement falls

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short of developing coherent and unique regional strategies. For example, there is significant inertia and logrolling. Although regional CINCs have authority over an entire area of responsibility (AOR), they must rely on component commands, the services, and defense agencies to carry out theater engagement plans. Because organizations have their own requirements and preferences, commanders can be presented with conflicting proposed activities of varying utility. Unless they are willing to invest great time and energy in the process, elements of the plan will reflect bureaucratic compromise rather than realistic needs.

A review of political-military situations suggests that each region has shaping needs that cannot be met by a supply-push process driven by service components and functional commands.

*Asia and the Pacific.* This region is an obvious candidate for confidence building measures and military transparency. Mutual suspicion among smaller states and concerns over the intentions and capabilities of China, Japan, North Korea, and India place this area at risk for both arms races and spiraling cycles of tension.

Planning by U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) should underscore multilateral instruments and activities that improve transparency, if not ties, among Asian nations.

*Central Europe.* New frontiers on the continent present different issues to U.S. European Command (EUCOM). The militaries in this region are well developed and most are oriented on the West. However, they are influenced by the legacy of the Warsaw Pact in doctrine and equipment. Moreover, not unlike the United States, they are interested in bolstering defenses against any future threats from the former Soviet Union. One objective of EUCOM theater engagement is improved interoperability with militaries in Central Europe. Combined exercises and education thus assume priority in the theater engagement plan.

The other important planning issue relates to conflicts emerging from the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which pose continuing challenges to the stability of Southeastern Europe and NATO. To cope with these demands, EUCOM has focused on building the defense capabilities of nations in the surrounding area. In addition, encouraging participation in future combined operations under the Atlantic Alliance or through a coalition of the willing has made continuing ties, trust, and access into crucial issues for the command engagement plan.

*Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa.* Even though the Nation does not have many vital interests in either Latin America or Africa south of the Sahara, stability in these regions is relevant because it reduces the likelihood that the Armed Forces will be called on to intervene in the future, whether in armed conflict or humanitarian relief. Modest engagement could go a long way toward limiting the need for such operations. The key issue for enhancing stability is the professionalism of foreign militaries. Because these regions have been traditionally characterized by an inordinate number of coups, efforts by U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and EUCOM that promote civil-military relations may have the greatest import. Moreover, since one trend has been excessive defense spending, training in resource management and security planning is needed. Ideally, long-term engagement should improve local abilities to keep the peace with minimal U.S. intervention.

*The Middle East.* The Central Region presents perhaps the most diverse challenge to theater engagement planning. Because the United States depends on bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates for potential operations against Iraq or Iran, efforts by U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in the Persian Gulf should be focused on continued access to those facilities. The need for interoperability in coalitions makes combined exercises a priority.

*Central and South Asia.* In republics of the former Soviet Union located in Central Asia, the issue is establishing initial ties and promoting professionalism in nascent military organizations. Finally, the need exists in South Asia for PACOM and CENTCOM to consider confidence building and transparency to reduce tension between India and Pakistan.

## Discrimination and Sufficiency

Another aspect of theater engagement is determining how much is needed. Because many of its benefits only emerge over the mid to long term, it is difficult to gauge what is a sufficient for shaping. Moreover, there are clear limits to effectiveness. Because general considerations such as stability of a government or defense of a given nation are determined by many factors, military-to-military engagement should be expected to accomplish only so much. Determining the sufficiency of shaping requires great sensitivity to conditions in target countries.

The significance of context was demonstrated in Albania and Poland, two nations located in the same region that benefitted from extensive engagement in the 1990s. But the results for these countries differed markedly. Under the tenure of Secretary of Defense

**the key issue for enhancing stability is the professionalism of foreign militaries**



U.S. Marine Corps (Ryan T. Ledoux)

U.S. and Thai troops crossing lake, Cobra Gold '00.

**even if differences do exist over policy, the process is biased in favor of unified commanders**

William Perry, Albania was the recipient of a generous engagement program. Yet many gains were lost when the government collapsed because of a failed pyramid scheme. As a result, a

national military establishment which the United States had been engaging essentially disappeared. By contrast, engagement programs were integral in

helping the Polish military by reinforcing its increasingly westward orientation and preparing it for NATO membership. Although Poland was more advanced militarily than Albania, the more critical difference related to the stability and reform character of the Polish government.

### Measuring Results

Despite the overriding importance of context, shaping should strive for common measures of effectiveness. Although the theater engagement process is designed to translate regional policy objectives into concrete plans, the experience to date demonstrates that this approach is difficult to apply. The problem appears to be balancing the latitude given theater engagement planners to craft appropriate programs with concrete policy guidance. In particular, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy generates prioritized regional objectives to guide engagement planning. But in deferring to CINCs as the best means of addressing these objectives, not much specificity is provided.

The problem that emerges is evaluating progress of an engagement plan for the entire year. One general officer visit or ship port call is likely to support broadly stated goals. For example, respect for human rights or improved civil-military relations are ideals that exceed the ability of a single program. The same is true for objectives such as improving military professionalism. Progress in such areas often combines programs conducted over many years.

One solution is a two-tiered system for evaluating shaping. The first tier measure of merit should address how a program succeeded or failed. The standard should be candid assessment of whether a program was executed as planned. The second tier of evaluation should relate to broader engagement aims. For example, improving the ability of host country militaries—such as through combined exercises or the African crisis response initiative—should be appraised as the product of a general strategy rather than a particular effort. A model exists in the *Congressional Presentation for Foreign Operations*. Generated by the Department of State to describe proposed activities for the following fiscal year, the presentation provides specific measures of merit for each program.

### Policy Guidance

As the United States increasingly relies on the Armed Forces to conduct programs which have policy relevance, they should be linked to defense and foreign policy on a global, regional, and especially national basis. The theater engagement process does not consistently include policy guidance on any of these levels.

One problem in the process is continuing strain in the defense establishment. Even though the Goldwater-Nichols Act benefitted military planning, it created tension on policy issues among theater commanders, the Joint Staff, and the defense secretariat. While the Office of the Secretary of Defense is charged with providing defense policy guidance, CINCs are effectively czars in their AORs. As a result, there is tension between the two. Indeed, OSD possesses much of the institutional knowledge of various regions. Because planners at regional commands tend to work on two-year rotations, they lack sufficient time to acquire the knowledge and expertise that action officers in the defense secretariat can develop by following one region for many years. Nevertheless, even if differences do exist over policy between OSD and CINCs, the process is biased in favor of unified commanders. Although extremely controversial issues might go to the Secretary or Chairman for arbitration, the views of CINCs or the Joint Staff prevail in most cases.

The solution to this problem would involve revising the planning process to require OSD to



Chilean landing ship,  
Unitas XL/West Africa  
Training Cruise '99.



2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division (Timothy A. Pope)



1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Jim Vahnegyll)

B-1B bomber with U.S.  
and coalition fighters,  
Bright Star '99/'00.

improve the existing process, it would not be a panacea. The process also lacks a systematic way of coordinating plans with the Department of State. One peculiarity of the post-Cold War period is that while foreign policy is principally the responsibility of the Department of State, DOD has much more call on resources to affect it. This disconnect has historically been solved partly through the foreign operations budget, which is controlled by the Department of State. However the expansion of defense shaping efforts to include items from its operations budget allows the Armed Forces to exercise great influence.

### Forcing Trade-Offs

Another shortfall in the current process is that it does not compel hard trade-offs between theaters, activities, or strategies. In particular, though the process allows for engagement planning to be harmonized and rationalized into a family of plans, it appears that neither the Chairman nor the Joint Staff has yet taken on this task. Integrating the plans into an overall plan would provide an ideal opportunity to evaluate the global picture for shaping—to balance interests, strategies, objectives, and resources. For example,

provide more specific guidance at the onset towards formulation of specific national, regional, and theater level objectives. Arguably, the Secretary should go beyond vague priorities and guidance to identify particular objectives and programs for protecting sealines in each year's plans.

Second, OSD should take a greater systematic role in formulating the activities in annexes. While specific activities pursued regionally are primarily the responsibility of CINCs, the political-military effects of shaping necessitates systematic OSD participation in planning.

While incorporating policy guidance from the defense secretariat in engagement plans could

2<sup>d</sup> Marine Division (Timothy A. Pope)

Marines fast-roping  
from Brazilian  
helicopter,  
Unitas XL '99.

this part of the process appears to be the logical candidate for determining whether DOD is devoting an appropriate level of resources to Europe, Asia, and Latin America. It is also an excellent opportunity to balance calls for current shaping with the need to maintain force readiness.

Yet current implementation falls short of providing effective program management. Instead the Directorate of Operational Plans and Interoperability (J-7), Joint Staff, seems to gather various plans and their activity annexes in a single document without imposing any trade-offs.

### CINCs are charged with making sure that country engagement programs are properly resourced

Assuredly, there are good reasons for the lack of strong oversight. First, the Joint Staff is ill suited to evaluate trade-offs between policy objectives in a given region. Secondly, because any hard choices would require that the Joint Staff challenge one or more CINCs—provoking a conflict between a three-star staff officer and four-star unified combatant commander—it is hard to imagine the Joint Staff winning a bureaucratic row regardless of the strength of its case. As a result, CJCS would almost certainly have to intervene. Thus far the Chairman has demonstrated no keen interest in weighing in on such matters. Given other strategic and defense policy issues, few situations will motivate CJCS to take on CINCs in matters concerning their AORs. Moreover, he would not necessarily find allies among the winners if only because commanders would probably find combined defense of their privileges more critical than marginal gains over one another in shaping. In sum, although the process

should be used to allocate resources, there are obstacles to realizing that potential.

### The “Lost” Policy

A final problem with the current theater engagement plan process regards the lost countries—Russia, Canada, and Mexico—which do not fall into any AOR. The Joint Staff J-5 regional offices write the theater engagement plan for them. This poses problems. First, the Joint Staff does not possess the same systematic insight into a particular region as fully engaged CINCs. In addition, Joint Staff officers are less versed than their unified command counterparts in regional issues. Nor do they control the instruments these commands could bring to bear.

Second, the Joint Staff—directed by a three-star general/flag officer—lacks the bureaucratic muscle to command adequate resources for its proposed shaping programs. Although the current practice of deferring influence to the CINCs is problematic from a policy perspective, it has virtues from a defense resources perspective. In particular, the same factors that make a CINC’s influence problematic also ensure that his shaping program would be provided with sufficient resources. A three-star general [executive agent] on the Joint Staff is much less able to argue the case for shaping programs over the desires of four-star regional commanders.

These features would not necessarily be problems if the countries in question ranked relatively low on the scale of U.S. interests. But Russia or Mexico could have great impact on security. Russia, the one country that might still challenge the United States on the strategic nuclear level, is also one of the few without a CINC charged with rationalizing a shaping strategy towards it. Although the defense challenges are different with Mexico, the irony remains that a country sharing a 1,920 mile border and a range of migration and drug trafficking issues with the United States does not merit a four-star general to formulate and integrate defense policy.

Comparing the planning process and outcomes for lost countries with those for Albania or Benin is striking. In the latter case, CINCs are charged with making sure that country engagement programs are properly resourced. Moreover, the blessing of CINCs provides protection—real or imagined—over a particular engagement plan. The sanction of a flag rank officer on the Joint Staff cannot hope to accomplish the same. We are moving in the right direction with shaping and theater engagement planning. Implementation, however, is not keeping pace. Moreover, as DOD



U.S. and Japanese  
P-3s, RIMPAC '00.



U.S. Navy (Andrew Rutigliano)



U.S. Marine Corps (Graham Linares)

Marines and Greek  
soldiers during  
Dynamic Mix '00.

takes a larger role in foreign policy, serious questions remain about how its policies and programs are synchronized with the Department of State and the interagency community.

### Implications for Force Planners

Current readiness and tempo problems underscore the tension between shaping responsibilities, contingency and crisis response demands, and wartime readiness requirements. Can DOD better plan for shaping activities? Should shaping requirements be considered explicitly in force structure planning and budgeting? As the next defense review approaches, these questions need to be assessed to ensure that our forces have the resources to support shaping objectives.

Planning for shaping requires full accounting of costs and benefits. While many advantages of shaping are impossible to quantify, the resources required to perform these missions should be easier to determine. A cursory review, however, reveals a confusing number of funding sources and accounts in the Departments of Defense and State, regional commands, services, and other agencies. To increase the transparency of funding, organizations supporting shaping efforts should report budget information through a central source, such as the *Congressional Presentation Document on Foreign Operations*. Understanding

true costs would help the services, component commands, and CINCs measure effectiveness, target resources, and make trade-offs.

Theater engagement could also help manage the operational tempo of forces in peacetime. When preparing CINC operations and exercise agendas, planners could integrate requirements for either contingencies or other operations into existing force planning efforts such as contingency scheduling conducted on the component command and service levels. Specific units could be named in the plan rather than just desired capabilities. While much of this is performed informally, making the process systematic by using existing command and control networks would provide defense leadership a master list of near-term requirements.

This process would identify where specific commands or forces would be committed to contingencies and readiness events or overtaxed by multiple taskings. Coordinating this planning would also identify in advance the personnel or units that will be in high demand in the next year. That would allow services to increase the availability of such units, prepare them for deployment, or identify substitutions to meet shaping needs. Trade-offs could be made between desired efforts and those feasible under readiness and tempo guidelines. More fundamentally, units could know far in advance when they are scheduled for a shaping event.

The theater engagement plan process shows great promise in rationalizing and disciplining efforts to conduct meaningful, focused, and productive peacetime engagement. Yet the process needs refinement to fashion a system that is more responsive to both CINC and interagency needs. Military capabilities must be scrutinized and reformed to achieve the optimum balance between shaping and warfighting capabilities. The current process gets a passing grade, but there is much room for improvement.

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